

TECHNOLOGY

Social Media's Small, Positive Role in Human Relationships

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It's just one factor in modern life that can increase connection in a world divided by the vagaries of capitalism, the disengagement of television, and the isolation of suburban sprawl.



[YouTube/Prometheus6812](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6812)

A few years ago I had an interview for a job at one of the leading academic departments in my field. Maybe because I knew that I wasn't likely to be offered the job, I saw the day as a relaxed opportunity to meet people carrying out interesting research. My comfort with the day was shaken, however, when a faculty member showed me ongoing research on avatars -- bots -- designed to interact with (and provide therapy for) human children with autism. I squirmed. I squinted. I tried to voice my discomfort. I lost my voice. I turned away. I was shaken for the rest of the day and on my way back. That flickering image of the bot we'd one day turn our children over to still haunts me.

I don't discount the appeal of automating such therapy. Working with children with autism is difficult, tiring work, especially since the social rewards -- the smile, the eye-contact, the hug, the thank you -- that make most of us tick are few and far between. I've never tried such an endeavor; I'm in no position to judge anyone.

Still the barely-pixelated, realistic face of the "therapist" talking on the screen scares me because it is indeed an indicator of one possible future. Much of what ails our modern life is exactly because we reduce the value of a human being to a number, say salary or consumer power. And the first to be thrown overboard tend to be the elderly, the disabled, and anyone not integrated tightly into the global supply-chain. This phenomenon, coupled with the growing powers of automation and artificial intelligence which promises to make replacing human beings even cheaper, means there is a very important conversation we need to be having -- but that conversation is not about the effects of social media.

That might not have been apparent to those who picked up their Sunday *New York Times* to find Sherry Turkle's latest essay arguing that social media are driving us apart. If anything, social media is a counterweight to the ongoing devaluation of human lives. Social media's rapid rise is a loud, desperate, emerging attempt by people everywhere to connect with *each other* in the face of all the obstacles that modernity imposes on our lives: suburbanization that isolates us from each other, long working-hours and commutes that are required to make ends meet, the global migration that scatters families across the globe, the military-industrial-consumption machine that drives so many key decisions, and, last but not least, the television -- the ultimate alienation machine -- which remains the dominant form of media. (For most people, the choice is not leisurely walks on Cape Cod versus social media. It's television versus social media).

As a social media researcher and a user, every time I read one of these "let's panic" articles about social media (and there are many), I want to shout: Look at TV! Look at commutes! Look at suburbs! Look at long work hours! That is, essentially, my response to Stephen Marche's "Facebook Is Making Us Lonely," which ran in *The Atlantic* magazine.

And then, please, look at the extensive amount of data that show that social-media users are having more conversations with people -- online and off!

What evidence we do have does not suggest a displacement of one type of conversation (offline) with another (online). All data I've seen say that people who use social media are either also more social offline; or that they have benefited from social media to keep in touch with people they otherwise could not; or that many people find fellows, peers and like-minded individuals they otherwise could not find. In other words, texting, Facebook-status updates, and Twitter conversations are not displacing face-to-face socializing -- on average, they are making them stronger. Social media is enhancing human connectivity as people can converse in ways that were once not possible. Surveys also show that most families think social media enhances their family life -- they can stay in touch better, more frequently. (Obviously, there are many complex impacts and not every person is going to "average" impacts.)

In other words, the people Turkle sees with their heads down on their devices while on a train somewhere are ... connecting to people they deem important in their lives. They are not talking to bots.

Why would they be talking to bots? People tend to hate talking to bots. Anyone who's active on social media would see that. And social media is certainly easy to dismiss from afar. But close up, it's alive and brimming with humanity (and all the good and bad that comes along with that). And, as with all conversational settings, social media does not make much sense taken out of the context. (Ever seen verbatim transcripts of face-to-face conversations? They are almost incomprehensible even though they make perfect sense in the moment.)

One other category that is often overlooked are people who are either not that comfortable at some aspects of face-to-face conversation but find online interaction to be liberating. It's not that these people are not seeking human contact. It's just that they find it hard to make that initial connection. They are the people who don't dominate conversations, the people who appear shy, are less outgoing, who feel nervous talking to new people. Sometimes it's because they are different from the people around them.

From Arab Spring dissidents who were minorities in their communities to my students from a variety of backgrounds, from gay teens in rural areas to just people who feel awkward when in company of new people, I've heard the sentiment again and again that new communication tools are what saved their (offline) social lives.

So far, I've talked about two categories of people -- those who were already social and who are becoming even more social offline as a result of offline connectivity, and those who have felt awkward offline and who are benefiting from online socializing. What I've not seen in the data I look at extensively (national surveys, qualitative research and other accounts) are significant number of people who were otherwise able and willing to be social face-to-face and are now lost to their devices. It is true that the rise of the Internet may result in some people feeling more isolated than before, but those will likely be the people who do not or cannot use these new tools to engage their social ties. Such people, who reluctantly socialize via online methods due to skill or cost or personal disposition may well find themselves *left out* of conversation.

One twist is that as people are increasingly able to find people based on interests -- rather than interacting in the old manner with people with whom they happen to be in the same geographic proximity -- people who depended on geographic proximity or family ties to provide social connectivity may indeed find themselves at a disadvantage if they are not able to develop their own networks. This is certainly a disruption and involves a certain kind of loss; however, it is hard to argue that it is all negative.

Finally, I've previously argued that some people may be "cyberasocial," that is, they are unable or unwilling to invoke a sense of social presence through mediated communication, somewhat similar to the way we invoke language -- a fundamentally oral form -- through reading, which is a hack in our brain. I suspect such people may well be at a major disadvantage similar to the way people who could not or would not talk on the telephone would be in late 20th century.

In sum, social media is propelling transitions and disruptions in the composition of social networks. Increasingly, what used to be a given (social ties you inherited by the virtue of where you lived or your familial ties) is now a task (social ties based on shared interests and mutual interest). Surely, there will be new winners and losers. None of this, however, indicates a flight from human contact.

Is there a qualitative loss, then? Maybe. Such a subjective argument cannot be refuted with all the data showing people are just as much, if not more, connected now compared with most of 20th century. My sense is that what qualitative loss there is happens to be less so than many other forms of conversation avoidance. In

fact, I can't count the number of times I was disturbed upon entering a house -- especially in Turkey where this is common -- because the television was glaring. Most people use the TV exactly like that -- a conversation killer. At least, if people are texting, they are texting a human being. Similarly, I doubt that anyone has not seen how a person can open the newspaper at the kitchen table to block out conversation.

Take the much-maligned teenagers. What have we done to them? First, we move to the suburbs. So, they can't get around unless they drive (which is pretty dangerous). Parents often only take them to organized activities where the activity -- hockey, violin, debate club -- dominates, not the leisurely social conversation with each other adolescents naturally crave. Or they can hang out at ... shopping malls. I need not say more about soul-killing.

And then when teenagers attempt to break out of this asocial, unnatural, and bizarre prison constructed of highways, no-recess time, and isolated single-family homes by connecting to *each other* through social media, we "tsk-tsk" them on how they don't know how to actually talk, or that they are narcissists because now we can see their status updates. Hint: Not much new going on here except teenage behavior is now visible thanks to technology and everyone else seems to have forgotten what it was like to be that age. And, yeah, mom and dad, sometimes they want to talk to their peers and not to you. That is not new. It's not even your fault. It's called being a teenager. A bit of a pain, perhaps, but the kids are neither the smartest, nor the dumbest, nor the most narcissistic, nor the most non-conversationalist generation ever.

Or consider the elderly -- the most poignant example Turkle raises. Data say they are now online in growing numbers. Why? So they can talk to people. Old classmates. Grandchildren. Each other. I've heard of many similar stories from people with disabilities: Social media allow them to connect in a world which does not otherwise allow them easy access. The fact that, rather than being separate "real" and "virtual" worlds, online and offline spheres are integrated is exactly why people can attempt to break away from the constraints in their offline lives by hacking their connectivity through online interaction. Can't be close to your family because your job took you to the other end of the planet? You can still share updates on Facebook. Your government is censoring news of your protest? You can

tweet photos of it. You cannot find people interested in a particular kind of music which moves you? Surely, there is a community.

I concur with Sherry Turkle and others that there needs to be a deep and serious conversation about valuing each other -- as humans, nothing more or less. And perhaps the impact of these rapidly evolving technologies on the "least among us" (as modern economic structures define them) is the correct place to start this conversation. However, to the degree this discussion can take place, it will mostly be because social media allow for such broad and deep conversations *among* the masses, who are reading and sharing rather than being lectured at and advertised to from their television screens.

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